

# *Julius*

a story by Brooks Kohler

“Enough of that,” muttered Julius, wiping red ink on his blue jeans. He had spent more than several minutes trying to make a pleasure out of the annoying task of needing to spool the typewriter’s ribbon.

Using the strength of his legs, he firmly braced the hardwood floor of the attic with his well worn socks, pushed down hard with the balls of his feet, and scooted the chair he sat in away from the mahogany writing desk holding the Remington No. 2 typewriter left to him by his grandfather. The chair’s legs screeched against the dry planks and placed him in a position to either stand or simply remain postured in a daze admiring the morning’s rays of golden light beaming through a tall window centered in the gable.

His boyhood home, a white, two story farmhouse at the end of a long gravel driveway stood perched on a knob against a backdrop of blue sky. A wrap around porch greeted a visitor, and from the porch, one looked out over a valley of yellow, field flowers.

Leaning toward the desk, he reached out to retrieve a thinly rolled cigarette resting with others in a chipped tea cup. Relaxed with the cigarette in hand, he crimped it between his lips, and leaned back to dig a near empty box of wooden matches from his pant's pocket. He struck a flame and placed it to the tip of the tobacco stick. The salty taste of warm sulfur fluted up through the paper and whirled around his tongue. He dragged hard and flicked out the match flame. Then, he stood, stretched out a yawn, and slowly crept to the window to peer out on his world of humid woods and buzzing bees.

From the gable window, he observed the valley of yellow flowers growing to a distant treeline concealing a small community made known by a towering church steeple. Shaped from hammered copper, the steeple had long lost its sheen and taken on a dull, green color, causing it to appear as a menacing abnormality on the horizon, akin to a pirate ship's mast. In cool weather when fog lay low, the steeple seemed to vanish into the murk, but

when warm, the sun burned off the mist, revealing the chance of a church being below and giving a sign in the form of a shiny gold object at the top reflecting light.

Corner to corner, the farmhouse showed age. Cracks in the walls revealed a sagging foundation, and in places the warping wood ripped apart dry flaking wall paper carefully applied with wheat paste too many years in the past to count.

Weakened by nature, the house reminded him of his own mortality. The attic felt like the safe space of his mind, whereas the floors below were akin to his body. The body grew older while the mind remained young, and in between was wisdom serving as the essence to keep the house a home. It felt cozy and even smelled cozy.

There were times when the temperature of the day affected the wood of the kitchen and seemed to reveal the sweet aroma of maple syrup from an ancient breakfast. On such days, he imagined a stack of syrup weeping pancakes built into a tower on a plate. Add a sweaty glass of ice

cold milk along with a few slices of greasy sausage, and it was a day in his life as a child on his parent's farm.

Taking hold of the attic's doorknob, Julius pulled the door backwards toward him to reveal a steep incline of thin, wooden steps leading down a narrow channel to the second floor.

With his hands high above his head to brace the ceiling of the tight squeeze, he descended the steps out of the attic by walking upright and down what was little more than a staircase built at the angle of a ladder propped against a roof line. It happened only once that he slipped and fell, but the memory of his stern tumble down the six foot drop to the second floor rivaled any beating he received while on a bender in a dingy tavern. So, as he made his way out of the nightmarish entry point to his writing space, he did so with a respect for unforgiving splinters.

Arriving gracefully from the attic, Julius stepped out to place his socks on the firm wood of the second floor. Before him was a staircase leading

down to the main part of the house, and to his right, a brown wood banister traveled an L-shaped walkway. Along the wall of the walkway were doors leading to rooms, and from where he stood, he had an observation point on the front door. As a child, he sat with his legs through the railings of the banister and waited nervously for his father to tromp up the steps of the porch, only to reach the door and force it open by his drunken, stumbling weight.

Crouching to the spot where he once sat, he rubbed the wood of the railings to feel the finger notches made from clutching them as tight as prison bars. He aimed his gaze at the front door with a contempt for the past, and mentally pulled the trigger to stop a memory from crashing through.

“Enough of that!” shouted Julius. “Enough!”

A chill came over him, flushing the tan from his face to reveal the pale of humanity beneath the glistening sweat of reality. Even though it was morning, the farmhouse was already beginning to

warm. On cool days he might stay in the attic well past noon, typing away to jazz while sipping a warm glass of Four Roses, but in the heat of summer, it became an oven drying the typing ribbons out faster than normal.

For refuge from the heat, he stood up from the banister and turned to the staircase leading down to the main floor, where in the kitchen through a small window above the sink, Julius peered out to the backyard. If there was anything he cherished about his life, it was early morning and the window. It was old, aging like himself, but unlike a job, reliable.

From behind, he heard the creaking of floorboards, spellbinding his attention. He took his eyes off the window, grabbed a nearby empty coffee cup by instinct, and positioned himself to see Taylor propped against the door frame leading to the kitchen. She had the habit of entering unannounced so much the soles of her black cloth sneakers became familiar to his ears and to his eyes her affection for plaid button up shirts and cuffed

blue jeans. This time the plaid shirt was red with blue stripes, far different than the last of yellow and green.

Her eyes fell on his ink stained hands and next on a wooden chair at the table. She moved to the chair and dragged it out slowly, causing it to screech its dry, nubby legs against the nail studded wooden planks of the floor.

She looked surprised yet sensitive to his situation. "You need sleep," she commented, as she sat in the chair.

"I'm going to put on jazz," said Julius.

Taylor studied his empty cup cradled by red stained fingers.

"Typing ink," replied Julius, rushing from the counter.

He hurried by her toward a door leading to the living room. Inside the living room, he cut a straight path across a large woven rug to a small wood table supporting a suitcase record player.

Noticing her enter he said, "All I could find in town is some old red typing ribbon. It's like blue



ink's not allowed around here."

"How long you been at it, Julius? I smell the booze and cigarettes."

Crouched before the player, Julius plucked an album from a stack of many and stood up quickly. "I went shopping at that old junk store nobody goes to."

Working the record out of a blank white record sleeve dingy by grime, he used both hands to palm the vinyl edge. Placing it to his nose, he sniffed the shiny black before leaning forward to hover the platter. Carefully, he threaded the long silver spindle needle through the record's center hole. Relaxing his tension, the record dropped.

With a few more manual maneuvers, crackling followed.

"You hear that?" asked Julius.

A whirling trumpet began to crescendo from the spinning record.

"It's nice," commented Taylor. "Who is it?"

"Don't know," replied Julius. "I bought it from a box containing jazz music. It was shoved in between

a Coleman and Davis.”

Leaning back, he used one arm as a prop and the other to hold out the blank record sleeve for her to get a gander.

“There’s nothing on it,” she said. “Why?”

He leapt to his feet like a bouncing fighter inhaling a second wind.

“It’s a demo or bootleg,” he replied. “Would you like some coffee?”

Taylor took the moment to sit on a musty green couch. “Didn’t I tell you I’m trying to drink more tea, Julius?”

He smiled at his mistake and rushed back to the kitchen.

Taylor stretched out, as if to nap, and gazed at the ceiling.

“I’ve only been a few times to that junk store, Julius,” she called out. “We need to go some time!”

“It’s not got much!” he replied, loudly from the kitchen.

“Yes, but it’s got music! It’d be nice to go!”

A small, rusting hook in the corner of the

ceiling, used for hanging plant baskets, caught her attention. It drew her eyes in like a magnet for the pupil and kept her engaged in a historical thought.

“Mrs. Wilson!” shouted Julius, from the kitchen. “She owned that small store where that junk store is!”

Taylor took her eyes off the hook and turned to the door leading to the kitchen.

“I never met her!” she yelled back.

“She was before your time, almost before mine, too,” said Julius, rushing through the door with a white porcelain cup.

“How so fast?”

“Sun tea,” replied Julius.

Taylor took the cup. It felt cool, and she noted the coolness by complaining, “It’s not warm.”

“Made it yesterday. Coffee’s warm if you want that, but it’s not ready.”

Taylor cradled the cup and leaned back on the couch. She stared at the hook on the wall.

“You into plants?”

Julius looked up. “My mother was. You’ll find

little hooks all over the place if you take a tour of the house.”

Taylor sipped her tea and licked the sweetness from her lip.

Julius sat down on the floor, tucking in his legs.

“How old are you, Julius?”

“Thirty-two, I think.”

“You think?”

“I’m somewhere that part of life.”

His hands were at his knees, and Taylor’s eyes were on them.

“You been writing.”

“I have and in red ink only.”

“Anything good?”

“Time will tell. Probably not.”

Through a tall rectangle window, hatched by a cross beam of wood, he fixated on a distant treeline marking the location of a stream that ran so clear it was as if the water did not exist.

“She had a plant hanging right there,” said Julius, pointing to the hook above Taylor. “I

remember seeing it when I was a little boy. It was a fern.” He stood and walked to the window. “I’d go wading in that stream down there. You ever been to that stream?”

“It’s called Ramsey Stream,” said Taylor.

“I never knew that. How do you know that?”

“I read it in a local history book. The Ramseys were a family of farmers back before anyone cared much about the land around here. They dug the spring to irrigate their field.”

“So they owned the field outside,” said Julius, “the field with the yellow flowers?”

“Maybe. It was a long time ago.”

“I should look into it,” he commented. “Would make a good story for a magazine.”

“That book on local history is in the library. I’ll reserve it for you.”

He turned away from the window and walked to the couch. “I forgot you work there. I’ve not been in there since I moved away.”

“Well, I don’t forget you write,” she said, peering up at him. “Mrs. Brooms walked in the

other day and handed me a magazine with your photo on the cover. I think she's in love with you. You got a girlfriend, Julius?"

He turned his attention back to the hook.

"Did you hear me?" she asked.

"Yes, I heard you. I have someone, someone I don't mention."

"She a writer?"

"She's a reader who challenges my writing, and at times I want to leave her."

"That's an oddly cold statement," said Taylor.

"Not really," argued Julius. "What's odd is I'm back on my parents' farm. I never figured I'd be. I'm surprised it's still standing."

"Why?"

"The wallpaper is failing, the boards creak, and it smells old."

"Old houses do that. My mother says a house not lived in begins to smell less and less like a home."

Julius grinned at the sentiment. Easing down, he returned to his place next to the record player.

“Well, it was never much of either to me. It felt more like a trap.”

“Is that why you drink so much?” asked Taylor.

“I only drink when I write, and seldom if that, but being here I wanted a bottle of bourbon.”

“I hear all the great writers drink.”

“I don’t know if I’d call them great because they drink. It’s caused many who were great to write poorly.”

“So why do you drink if you know that?”

“Why do you ask so many question?”

“Maybe I want to write, and maybe it’s a question worth asking if I take it up.”

“Some question are worth avoiding the time it takes to answer, but to answer this one, I’ll tell you. I have memories of this place I can’t quite shake the fear of.”

Wiggling her nose, unsure of how to respond, she changed the subject. “The tea’s not bad, but I wish it were warm.”

“You should’ve been here yesterday.”

“I was at work.”

“Oh, yes, work. That thing people around here do.”

“You should try it,” said Taylor. “You’re too pale. A job in the sun would put some color on your cheeks. We’re bucking hay this week. You should come out to the farm.”

“You know,” said Julius, “the other day I went to the hardware store to get some penny nails. A man behind the counter said to me, ‘I hear writers don’t work.’ I should show him my hands.”

“People around here don’t have ink on their hands,” said Taylor. “Rub some axle grease on them to prove a point.”

Julius chuckled. “They make trends, you know,” he blurted.

“Who? Hardware stores?”

“Writers,” said Julius. “Just like the mountains make clouds, writers make trends. The newest one is writing reviews of movies.

“People get paid for that?”

“Yes, and surprisingly well,” replied Julius,



slouching in disappointment. “The problem is nobody really wants to write about them, but given so many publishers are wanting movie reviews, writers are dashing off to their desks to tap out the latest film they watched. It truly is a depressing time to be writing.”

“I like movies,” volunteered Taylor.

“I do, too,” exclaimed Julius, “but I want to watch them, not write about them!”

“Could I write movie reviews?” asked Taylor.

“You could, but the competition’s tough. A friend of mine writes them. She wrote two novels, ran out of ideas, and turned to reviews. It pays the bills, but even she struggles at times.”

“Oh, well, we don’t have but one theater in town so I guess I’d struggle more than she does.”

The record clicked on the center. Leaning toward the player, Julius peeked inside. “Should I flip it?”

“Might as well.”

With care, he lifted the needle with a finger and gently taking hold of the record, raised it up off

the spindle to flip it over with a flick of the wrist and drop it back on the platter.

“Fancy trick,” commented Taylor.

“Good friend of mine is a disc-jockey. He has parties. He spins the records.”

Taylor relaxed. “When’s your father being buried?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Then you’re leaving?”

“That’s my plan.”

“Ever think of moving back here?”

Julius looked up at the ceiling, scanned the room, and then turned to her eagerly, waiting for an answer he knew she expected. “I feel like I live here when I don’t,” he said.

“That means you’re not,” said Taylor, rising up from the couch to land her sneakers on the floor. “I gotta go. Thanks for the tea.”

As she rushed to the kitchen, Julius spoke softly, but too softly for her to hear, and the lonesome thud of the front door reporting her departing cut off his words, leaving them to cling to

the air like dust in a beam of light.

She was gone. All that remained was the mysterious jazz performer as a reminder she was there and a house that felt more empty than before.

Pushing himself to stand, he began a walk to the front door, where through a slender window looking out over the porch and the field of the yellow flowers, he saw her hurrying away.

He studied her leaving for a moment, thinking to himself she wanted to escape but knew not how, and then he turned to look up at the steps leading to the banister. The hidden stairwell of the attic beckoned for his words to stain the page.

THE END

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